

# *Field Report*

## Hot Springs National Park

### ■ 1.0 Summary

Hot Springs National Park (NP), located in the City of Hot Springs, Arkansas, is a site that includes significant historical, cultural and natural resources. It is unique among National Parks in that it incorporates both an urban component and surrounding natural areas of the Zig Zag Mountains. The most significant feature of the Park is the 143-degree Fahrenheit thermal water that emanates from 47 springs located on the southwest side of Hot Springs Mountain. As a result of its temperature and mineral content, Hot Springs water has long been believed to have therapeutic qualities. It is legend that Native Americans regularly visited the site for as long as 10,000 years and it was frequently visited by French traders and trappers before the Louisiana Purchase made Arkansas part of the U.S. in 1803. As Arkansas became settled, disputes arose over ownership of the water, and in 1832 Hot Springs became the first area placed under Federal reservation solely to protect a natural resource. Bathhouses began to attract visitors and evolved from crude wooden structures in the mid-1800s to opulent, full-service resorts by the early 1900s. During the late 1800s, Hot Springs Creek was placed in a culvert under Central Avenue. This reduced flooding and enabled the area to develop. The Hot Springs became part of the National Park System in 1916 when the NPS was established.

After World War II, medical advances and changes in vacation patterns led to the decline of interest and ultimately the closing of, the Hot Springs bathhouses. The economy of the region was also negatively impacted when gambling casinos that had operated openly in the city for decades were closed down in the late 1960s. Hot Springs is still a major tourist attraction, however, drawing over 1.5 million recreational visitors annually. Eight bathhouses that line the east side of Central Avenue today are part of the Park. One of them, the Fordyce, has been restored to its early 20<sup>th</sup> century condition and serves as the Visitor Center and museum. Another, the Buckstaff, still functions as a bathhouse and several private hotels provide traditional baths as well. A unique role for the NPS in Hot Springs is as a supplier of spring water to six bathhouses and a hospital. It also provides jug fountains where thousands of gallons are collected free daily. The six unoccupied bathhouses are maintained by the NPS, which is attempting to lease them for adaptive reuse. The Park also contains 5,500 acres of forested mountain terrain, featuring an observation tower, several scenic roads and 29 miles of hiking trails.

Transit service is currently provided to the Park by the City of Hot Springs, which runs free historic rubber-tired trolleys serving the downtown area and the Hot Springs Mountain Observation Tower. Service is provided on 20-minute headways and ridership has been increasing. Licensed taxi and sightseeing services are also available. With the recent opening of a major new Convention Center in Hot Springs tourism is expected to increase. The Park sees significant opportunity to improve the visitor experience through

greater use of Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS). One of the Park's major problems is that does not control any visitor parking in the urban portion of the Park. Feasible ATS options to be considered include:

- Continuation of the current rubber-tired trolley service that serves the downtown, the Observation Tower and the Hot Springs Mountain road;
- Implementation of a transit route between downtown Hot Springs, the West Mountain Drive and the West Mountain Summit Drive;
- Provision of transit service to the Gulpha Gorge Campground and the eastern end of the Hot Springs NP; and
- Further development of Hot Springs Transportation Center into a major intermodal center for Park visitors. Improved signing and increased levels of transit service would be used to encourage use of remote parking at the Center which is located just south of the Park near the new Convention Center and the northern end of the Hot Springs Greenway.

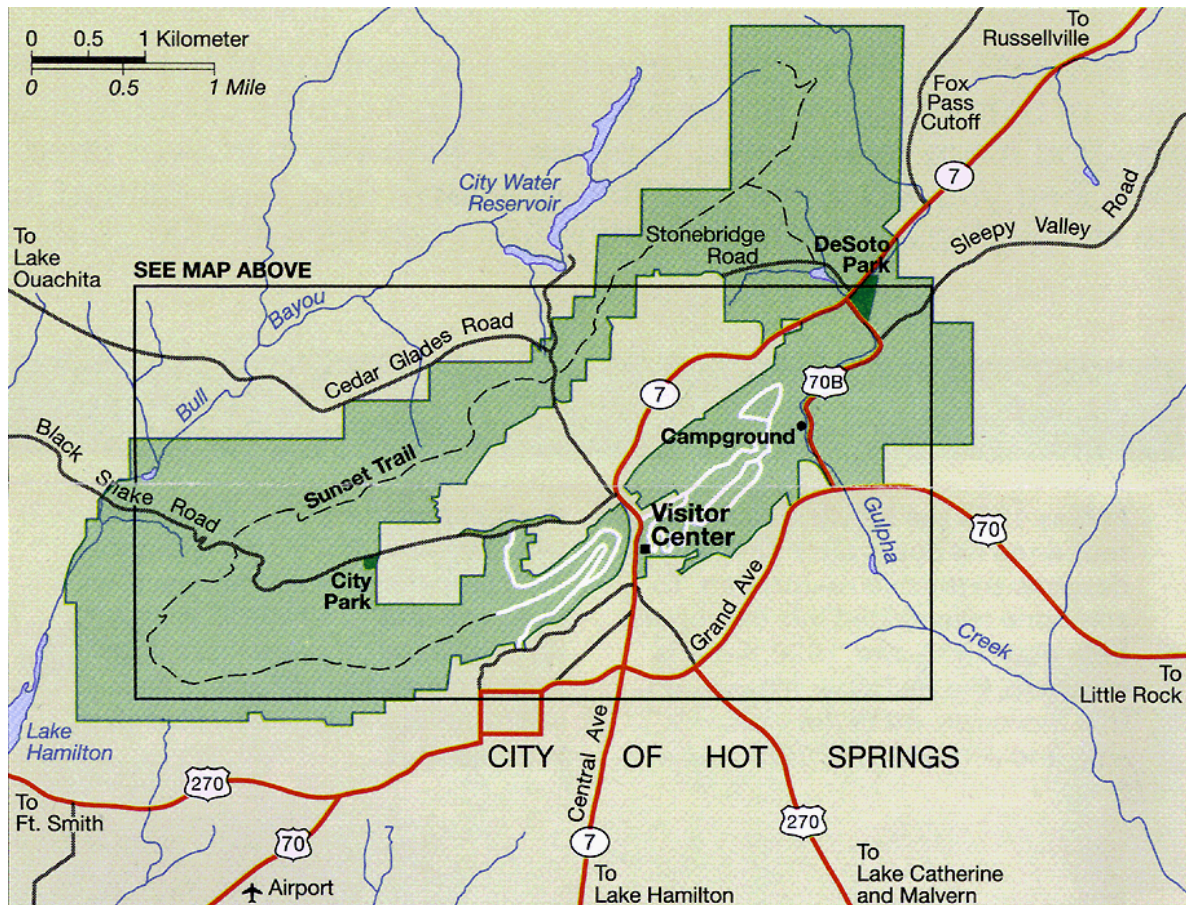
## ■ 2.0 Background Information

### 2.1 Location

Hot Springs NP is located in the City of Hot Springs, Arkansas, and 55 miles southwest of Little Rock. Hot Springs has a population of approximately 33,000 people and is located in Garland County, which has a total population of 85,000. The Park includes part of the downtown area and mountainous areas that surround the older part of the City. As a result most new development has occurred south of the downtown area. The City extends as far south as Lake Hamilton, a rapidly growing resort and residential area. Hot Springs is located in the Zig Zag Mountains, which are located on the eastern end of the Ouachita Range. Three major highways serve the City, U.S. 70, U.S. 270 and Arkansas Route 7. Figure 1 shows the layout and location of the Park.

### 2.2 Administration and Classification

Hot Springs was established in 1832. It was added to the National Park System in 1916, when the NPS was established to manage the national parks. The Park is in the NPS Midwest Region and the Superintendent is Roger Giddings.

**Figure 1. Map of Hot Springs National Park and Environs**

### 2.3 Physical Description

The Park consists of 5,500 acres and includes several diverse elements. The east side of Central Avenue in the downtown area includes nine buildings, including eight early 20th Century bathhouses and an historic building that serves as Park administrative headquarters. The Fordyce has been restored to serve as the Park's Visitor Center and museum. The Buckstaff still functions as a bathhouse, while the other six bathhouses are vacant and in different stages of repair. They are available for lease either as bathhouses or for adaptive uses. Behind these buildings, on the lower reaches of Hot Springs Mountain, is the Grand Promenade, a scenic walkway that provides views of the both the bathhouses and the surrounding mountains. The Grand Promenade is one of the areas where open springs can be viewed; the others have been covered to prevent contamination.

Hot Springs Mountain, located east of Central Avenue, includes an Observation Tower, that is accessed by a scenic one-way loop road. This road is easily accessible from downtown Hot Springs, via Fountain Avenue. The current Observation Tower was completed in 1983 and is the third tower that has been built at the same location. The original tower was completed in 1877. A private concessionaire operates the Observation Tower. Hot Springs Mountain adjoins North Mountain, which has an access road that is now closed

due to storm washouts but is scheduled for repair. There are numerous hiking trails in this area as well.

West of Central Avenue is West Mountain, which also includes a scenic drive via West Mountain Road and West Mountain Summit Road. Access to and egress from these roads is via residential streets; as a result this area is more popular with local residents. More remote areas of the Park include Sugarloaf Mountain, located along the north side of Hot Springs, Music Mountain in the southwest section of the Park and Indian Mountain, at the eastern end of the Park. Mountain summits in the Park range from roughly 1,000 to 1,205 feet in elevation.

## 2.4 Mission and Goals of Hot Springs National Park

President Andrew Jackson created Hot Springs National Reservation in 1832 for the purpose of protecting the springs and assuring that water would be available to the public. The area was placed under the NPS jurisdiction in 1916. The original purpose of the reservation is still fulfilled. Spring water is made available free to the public through several fountains located throughout the downtown Park area. The water is sold by the NPS to several private hotels and a hospital that still provide traditional or therapeutic baths.

## 2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Measurement of visitation at Hot Springs NP is difficult since the most heavily patronized portion of the Park is located in the downtown area. The Park estimates that there are 3.5 million annual visitors but that only 1.5 million are using the area for recreational purposes. The remainder are either traveling through the City or using local businesses and community services located in the area. Visitation estimates for 1998 for some of the major Park attractions are:

• West Mountain	336,000
• Bathhouse Row	577,000
• Fordyce Visitor Center	241,000
• West Mountain Summit	110,000
• Mountain Tower	127,000
• Hot Springs Mt. Road	139,000
• Buckstaff Bathhouse	28,000

In general, both recreational and non-recreational visits have remained steady through the 1990s. Visitation is highest during the summer months and in October but is significant at other times of the year as well. In 1998, recreational visitation peaked at just over 150,000 in June, July and October, but remained over 100,000 for all months except December, January and February. The City and NPS both believe that the completion of a new Convention Center will help increase the level of visitation to the City and provide additional convention business throughout the year.

Visitor survey data were not available, but Park personnel indicated that most visitors come from Arkansas and surrounding states, including Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi and Oklahoma.

## ■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

### 3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Most visitors to Hot Springs NP arrive and circulate by automobile. Transit service is provided to the Park by the City of Hot Springs, however, and both entities are anxious to build upon this base. Some of the transportation issues faced by the Hot Springs NP are discussed below.

The NPS does not control any parking in the downtown section of Hot Springs. Curb parking is not permitted on the Park side of Central Avenue. There are both public and private lots available but signing and pricing are not always clear to the visitor. Lack of parking is believed to be a major drawback to the Park's efforts to rehabilitate the six vacant bathhouses. Private investors are being actively sought to accomplish this but estimated renovation costs range from \$500,000 to \$5 million. Without reliable parking, rehabilitation loans are difficult for potential investors to obtain.

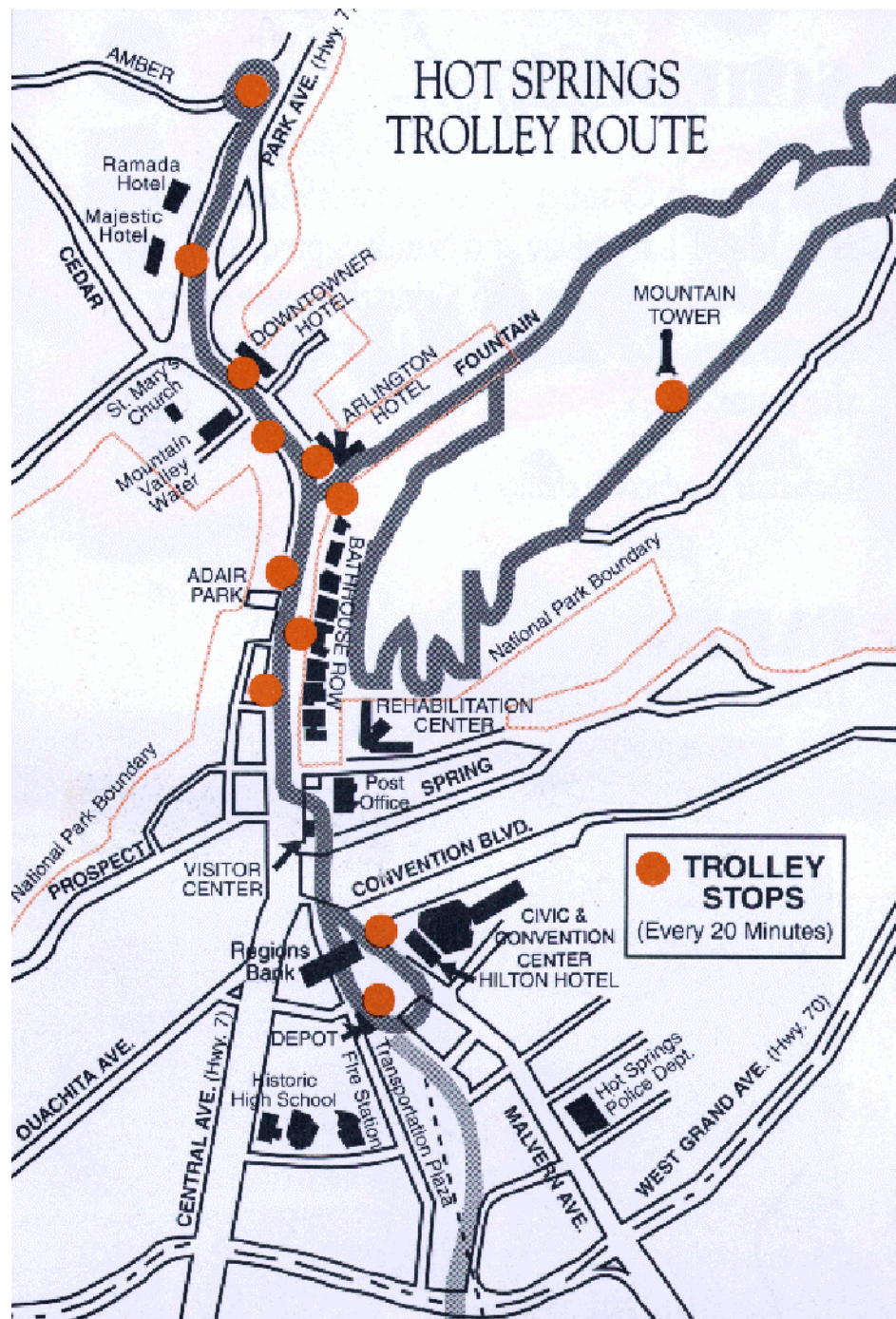
The City of Hot Springs is currently evaluating the feasibility of constructing a major parking garage behind the businesses on the west side of Central Avenue. A garage would help to consolidate the parking supply in downtown Hot Springs. A major concern is the geological instability of both West and Hot Springs Mountains. The steep slopes behind the downtown area are subject to frequent rockslides that have caused major property damage and even loss of life. A recent FEMA study recommended that any new construction in this area should be used to improve the stability of the adjacent slopes. The City views a parking garage as a possible method of stabilizing the slope. The City has received \$5 million to construct a 325-car parking deck.

Both the City and the NPS support efforts to make greater use of the Hot Springs Transportation Plaza. This Center is located at the old train station at the south end of downtown Hot Springs. The Plaza currently serves as the transit center for the City's transit system, Intracity Transit (IT). This service includes the free Hot Springs Trolley, which serves the downtown area, "hotel row" at the northern end of the downtown, the Hot Springs Mountain Road and the Observation Tower. Figure 2 shows the route of the Hot Springs Trolley, which runs on 20-minute headways between May and October and is free to users. Estimated trolley ridership for 1999 is 35,000. Estimated costs provided for the year 2000 budget are just under \$100,000 with costs split in roughly equal proportions between City funds and Federal funds supplied through the State of Arkansas. The total operating cost of the Hot Springs transit system is just over \$1 million annually. In addition to the three fixed routes and the trolley system several other services are provided including:



- Special services are provided during the spring race meet at the Oaklawn track;
- ADA-accessible routes; and
- Special contract routes for social service agencies.

**Figure 2. Route of Hot Springs Trolley**



On February 1, 2000, the transportation plaza became the hub and home of a scenic diesel powered train ride for visitors known as the Hot Springs White River Scenic Railroad. The train ride originates at the plaza, travels five miles through scenic vistas and returns after about an hour and a half ride.

Hot Springs currently has a Congressional set aside of \$1.4 million for additional transit-related improvements to the Plaza. Due to the difficulty of raising matching funds, the money will probably be spent over a three-year period. Proposed improvements include:

- Remodeling of the interior and exterior of the old train station (see Figure 3);
- Additional parking;
- Expansion of the current bus passenger transfer area;
- Improvements and enhancements to the Plaza trail and pedestrian environment;
- Tour bus parking; and
- Improved signal system at plaza entrance.

**Figure 3. Picture of Transportation Depot with Trolley**



These improvements would help to establish the Transportation Plaza as a transit-oriented gateway to the Park and the downtown area. There is already available parking at the Transportation Plaza that could be used to better serve Park visitors. Expansion of the existing Hot Springs trolley service, improved signage from major access highways to

the Transportation Plaza and promotion of the transit system to Convention Center users can all be used to encourage greater use of the transit system.

A number of tourist-oriented transit services are either in operation or under discussion. These include:

- Duck tours are provided between Hot Springs and Lake Hamilton; and
- A tram service has been proposed as part of the Hot Springs Greenway, which is being developed in stages along Hot Springs Creek between the Transportation Plaza and Lake Hamilton.

### **3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Economic development is a major objective of Hot Springs and surrounding Garland County. Tourism continues to be a major industry in the area. Approximately 60 percent of the County's work force are employed in either the Trade or Service sectors. The 1998 Hot Springs & Garland County Business Guide estimated that the County received just under two million visitors in 1998, who spent a total of \$336 million. Just over \$3 million was generated from a three percent tax on hotel, motel and restaurant bills, indicating a total expenditure in these categories of \$100 million. Total retail sales for the County was \$986 million.

In addition to the Park, major tourist generators in Hot Springs include the Oaklawn Park, which has thoroughbred racing annually between late January and mid-April. Total attendance at the track for 1998 was 689,000 with a mutual handle of \$268 million. Another economic boost is anticipated from the upcoming renovation of the Magic Springs Theme Park, which will open with 25 rides and a waterpark in May 2000.

The recent opening of a new \$35 million Convention Center and adjoining hotel is expected to attract larger conventions from a wider geographic area. There are currently initiatives underway to attract artists to Hot Springs in order to promote development of galleries and other cultural attractions. Hot Springs developed a downtown Master Plan in the late 1980s, which has been implemented in stages. Both landscaping and historic preservation have been priorities of that plan. The University of Arkansas Community Design Center recently conducted a study of parking requirements for downtown Hot Springs. A number of alternative locations for structured parking were evaluated and recommendations developed for further study of a 528-space, \$21 million garage on the west side of Central Avenue. The City recently received \$5 million and will downsize the originally planned parking facility to a 325-car parking deck facility only. It will provide important parking for the downtown and bathhouse row area of the Park.

The study estimated that Bathhouse redevelopment would require additional 400 spaces in the immediate downtown area. The NPS and the City continue to pursue bathhouse renovation as a major economic opportunity for downtown Hot Springs. A recent proposal by actor Jerry Van Dyke for conversion of the Hale Bathhouse into a Museum and soda shop fell through due to lack of financing. The City plans to pursue Federal funds for renovation in addition to private investment capital.



### **3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

The geological instability of the slopes behind downtown Hot Springs has been a major concern to both the City and the NPS. A FEMA study was conducted in 1997 to determine what actions could be taken to help stabilize Hot Springs and West Mountains and allow for further redevelopment of the downtown area. The City has noted that an opportunity exists on the west side of Central Avenue to use new construction to help stabilize the mountainside.

Other resource issues include flood control in the downtown area and continuing concern about the purity of the Hot Springs water. The NPS also has concerns about resource damage, inappropriate uses and vandalism in some remote areas of the Park that are difficult to police.

### **3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Primary recreational activities in the Park are sightseeing, bathing and hiking. Traditional baths can be obtained at the Buckstaff Bathhouse, Libby Memorial Physical Medicine Center and Hot Springs Health Spa, or at several private hotels in the downtown area. Recreational activities in the mountain sections of the Park are limited primarily to scenic drives and hiking. Motorized vehicles and mountain bikes are banned from trails due to the small size of the Park and the availability of large open tracts in the neighboring Ouachita National Forest.

A major new recreational facility in Hot Springs is the Greenway, which is planned to run from the Transportation Plaza along Hot Springs Creek to Lake Hamilton. This is a multi-use trail that would serve a number of city neighborhoods and local parks. Some plans also call for an extension from the Transportation Plaza into the downtown area.

Garland County and western Arkansas are becoming more popular as retirement havens. Hot Springs Village, located about 15 miles north of Hot Springs is one of the largest of these retirement communities, containing eight golf courses and four lakes within its boundaries. Development is increasing around major recreational lakes in the Hot Springs region. These include Lake Hamilton and Lake Catherine, which border the City of Hot Springs, and Lakes DeGray and Ouachita, which are within a half-hour drive. Swimming, fishing, powerboating and water-skiing are major recreational activities in the Hot Springs area.

In addition to the racing season, Hot Springs offers a variety of special events including a documentary film festival, two major music festivals, Oktoberfest, Miss Arkansas Pageant, several Art shows and numerous others.

## ■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

### 4.1 Unit Plans

Planning activities at the Hot Springs NP are currently concentrated on adaptive reuse of the six vacant bathhouses along Central Avenue. One of these, the Ozark, is shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Picture of Ozark Bathhouse**



### 4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The NPS has a strong working relationship with City of Hot Springs, as well as the Greater Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce and the Hot Springs Advertising and Promotion Commission. The Public Transportation Section of the Arkansas State Highway and Transportation has been very supportive in supplying discretionary Federal funds for the Hot Springs Trolley system and the Transportation Plaza.

## ■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

### 5.1 Magnitude of Need

Limited and scattered available parking in the downtown area of Hot Springs is a significant transportation problem for Hot Springs NP. While ridership on the trolley represents a small percentage of total Park visitors, numbers have been growing. Improved information services and further development of the Transportation Plaza as a multimodal center have great potential to alleviate this problem. Completion of the new Convention Center provides a much larger market for transit service.

The West Mountain and West Mountain Summit Roads are not easily accessible from the downtown area. Expanded transit service to this area, similar to that provided to the Observation Tower, would help increase accessibility for visitors.

### 5.2 Feasible Transit Alternatives

Feasible ATS options to be considered include:

- **Continuation of the current rubber-tired trolley service that serves the downtown, the Observation Tower and the Hot Springs Mountain road.**
- **Implementation of a transit route between downtown Hot Springs, the West Mountain Drive and the West Mountain Summit Drive.** This route would offer a schedule similar to that of the existing trolley with timed transfers available at the Transportation Plaza.
- **Provision of transit service between the Transportation Plaza, the downtown and the Gulpha Gorge Campground/Picnic Area.** Addition of an experimental loop to Intracity Transit Route 3, which would extend service along Park Avenue and Gorge Road and East Grand Avenue, could be implemented to test this market. This route could also serve De Soto Park, a city park that is within the Hot Springs NP boundary.
- **Further development of Hot Springs Transportation Center into a major intermodal center for Park visitors.** Improved signing and increased levels of transit service would be used to encourage use of remote parking at the Center which is located just south of the Park near the new Convention Center and the northern end of the Hot Springs Greenway. The tour bus staging area identified in the City's FTA application would be used to reduce this traffic in the downtown area.

## ■ 6.0 Bibliography

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Hot Springs Sentinel-Record, *City Looks to Upgrade Transportation Services*, September 24, 1999.

## ■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Roger Giddings, Superintendent Hot Springs National Park

Dale Moss, Assistant Superintendent, Hot Springs National Park

J.L. “Jim” Gilbert, Public Transportation Administrator, Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department

Kent A. Myers, City Manager, City of Hot Springs

Lance Hudnell, Deputy City Manager, City of Hot Springs

Jean Smith, General Manager, South Central Arkansas Transit

J. Ted Hillmer, NPS Midwest Region